Cummings J.

***Infinite Roads in a Yellow Wood: or, Why Following an Alternative Career Path is Sometimes More Fun*.**

Media Commons, Future of the Book, 2011. Available at: http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/alt-ac/pieces/infinite-roads-yellow-wood.

#alt-academy

Infinite Roads in a Yellow Wood

or, Why Following an Alternative Career Path is Sometimes More Fun

Contributed by James Cummings
Manager of InfoDev at University of Oxford
May 07, 2011

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Introduction

The following narrative outlines the career path that I have taken in becoming what some call an 'alternative' academic. I currently hold the post of manager of InfoDev of the Computing Services of the University of Oxford. Previous to this I was the Senior Research Technologist in the Research Technologies Service in the same service department. I publish academic articles, present conference papers and posters, and — although it is not core to my job description — also undertake some teaching. Here, I follow the road through my higher education, postgraduate qualifications, and a few of my posts, before looking at how many of my contributions to various communities, while not a formal part of my employment, have helped me gain experiences that are useful to it. As I trace the road I have taken so far I attempt to examine the implications of my career choices and how they might encourage and reassure others undertaking similar routes. While Frost's metaphor of roads diverging in a wood as applied to life choices (or in this case academic and employment decisions) is necessarily cliché, I offer it here to highlight not only that there is no single road, but that there exist many useful and interesting ways to explore.

Past

My family background was an academic one, my father being a professor of pure mathematics and my mother a librarian at the University of Waterloo in Canada. That I was going to do an undergraduate qualification was a certainty, and further qualifications would definitely be seen as a beneficial start in life. My academic goals were fairly clear by the time I started my undergraduate degree: I was completing a medieval studies specialist BA with a Latin minor at the University of Toronto. I had chosen to attend St Michael's College because it contained the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (in whose library I later worked in as a student assistant) and had a good reputation in that field. I was interested in researching medieval textual culture, specifically the historical basis for medieval drama, and so chose the path of a BA which would give me a good grounding in medieval studies.

It was certainly my intention to undertake (post)graduate work, and I had no doubt that I was going to do an MA and hopefully a PhD. No other career paths had really occurred to me — what other road does one follow with a BA in medieval studies? By the time I was finishing my undergraduate degree I was already planning to do a PhD concentrating on the specialised sub-discipline of archival records-based research in early drama. Mostly this has been inspired by volunteer work I undertook at the Records of Early English Drama project, centred at the University of Toronto, which edit extracts from manuscripts that provide external evidence of drama, and other communal entertainment from the Middle Ages until 1642, when the Puritans closed the London theatres.

I was probably unusual as an undergraduate in that I had made a point of attending academic conferences in Toronto, and even had been going to the well-known (to medievalists) International Congress on Medieval Studies at the University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo. Following on from my undergraduate degree I chose to go to the Centre for Medieval Studies (now the Institute for Medieval Studies) at the University of Leeds in England, for a number of reasons. One reason was that they allowed me to do two research projects instead of the usual single one, in addition to their offerings of courses with well-known scholars in the field of Early Drama. This allowed me to further explore my interests in the documentary evidence for our understanding of the past. This degree was excellently inter-disciplinary, as was my undergraduate one but, like many such programmes at the time,

it suffered from an emphasis in training people for the standard notion of an assumed academic career. Few would have thought an MA in medieval studies appropriate training for what is now being come to be called an 'alternative academic' career path. Although I am sure they may have have existed if I had looked, my assumptions of where my career was going meant that I saw no forks in the road.

Following my MA, I decided to build on my research projects and do a PhD in a similar academic area at the School of English, also at the University of Leeds. One aspect of the PhD which interested me was how we construct our modern interpretations of historical culture based on extremely skimpy, decontextualised fragments of text records. Hence my work was developed from a firm base of many appendices of archival transcription of late Middle English and Latin documents. Part of the point was to demonstrate that, through the examination of these records of early English drama in their original manuscript context, we could come to a greater understanding of their nuances and simultaneously widen our sometimes-limiting scope to include overlooked or otherwise discounted but useful records. With a title (modified by my upgrade committee) of "Contextual studies of the dramatic records in the area around The Wash, c. 1350-1550", I always knew my PhD would only ever have the small readership of those already interested in this field. It could be argued that doing this PhD in the UK was the major diversion from the road I was on, because of the financial implications that the required student loans for overseas student tuition would have on my career.

While working on this PhD I was undertaking a significant amount of teaching, not only at the University of Leeds but in commuting to a number of universities around this area of England. One obvious reason was to supplement the meagre remnants of the substantial loans I had taken to pay my overseas student tuition fees — but partly this was also because I still imagined myself pursuing a traditional academic career. I was planning ahead, and assumed that traditional university lecturing would be an important aspect of my CV for future employment. This would not turn out to be the case; however, the experience I gained in lecturing, seminar teaching, structuring courses, and in administration would prove invaluable to my career regardless.

As it happens, I had always been very familiar with computers. I grew up using the mainframes of the University of Waterloo thanks to my father, and quickly migrated to programming and pushing the (policy and technical) boundaries of those infrastructures and networks to which I had access. Partly owing to my long experience, during my PhD I was also employed to manage a cluster of computers used by postgraduates in the department and I assisted in teaching some 'Computing for Arts Students' courses. The notion of Digital Humanities as a field in its own right was an idea only starting to blossom. If I had wanted to pursue a more traditional academic career, I probably would have better spent more of this time publishing. While I did publish some amount, and certainly gave quite a number of conference papers, the reality of teaching a heavy load while finishing my PhD meant my CV was not as rich in publications (at that point) as I would have liked.

However, as I was writing up the final revision to my PhD, two major roads diverged in my career path: while one was a traditional academic highway, the other was a scenic route from which I could branch off from a standard alternative career path to an 'alternative academic' one. As I would be finishing soon I was looking for employment, and having settled in the UK for personal reasons was restricting my search geographically. I needed to be gainfully employed partly because of the large student loans I had taken out, and I was fortunate to find a three year research associate post on the CURSUS project[1] at the University of East Anglia. This project involved editing medieval Benedictine liturgical service books, along with the related sources, and using some innovative digital humanities methodologies to build a useful online research site. Although I had never been interested in the study of liturgy, this seemed ideal as it was merging both my medieval and computing interests. With the CURSUS project I was responsible not only for the transcription and editing of medieval manuscripts, but also the transformation, manipulation, and online publication of the data we were creating. To accomplish this I had to extend my existing skills in web technologies and become familiar with the Guidelines of the Text Encoding Initiative (then in their P4 version) and with associated technologies (such as XSLT and XQuery). The ability to transform textual data in order to facilitate research was gratifying and allowed me to blend my interests in medieval textual studies with those in computing.

Sadly the three-year funding for the CURSUS project, which I had enjoyed immensely, came to an end and I was again looking down the career path for a job. Such a funded research associate position in the UK is frequently an intermediate roadside stop on the way to a standard academic lecturing post, and for a while I assumed this was the road I was still on. During my time at UEA I had also undertaken a fair amount of teaching of early drama and Chaucer, at times being wholly responsible for the course content, but when a full lecturing post came up to teach the very same courses I was not even given a courtesy shortlisting. While, of course, I can't know the comparative field of applicants and it is reasonable for the

shortlisting committee presumably sought someone more senior, it might have been polite to pretend to consider me. I honestly don't mention this out of bitterness (I think my resulting career has been better suited to my interests and wouldn't have expected actually to get the job in any case), but in addition to my recently post-doctoral status one of the reasons I think I was dismissed out of hand is that I was already being viewed as a digital humanities specialist rather than a humanities researcher with information technology skills. This might not have been an inaccurate assessment: I applied for a number of mainstream academic positions but was increasingly attracted to those with at least a technological component.

After working for the CURSUS project, I found a position as a research officer specialising in text encoding best practice at the Oxford Text Archive (OTA) at the University of Oxford. Founded in 1976, this is probably one of the oldest of the electronic text archives and it played a seminal role in the history of humanities computing. At this point in its history it was also hosting the UK's Arts and Humanities Data Service: Literature, Languages, and Linguistics (one of 5 AHDS subject centres). One the services the AHDS provided for the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) was to assess the technical appendices of funding bids and to attend the funding panels of applications with significant digital aspects, to provide advice on technical feasibility and best practices. Simultaneously the AHDS would give free advice to those completing funding applications, to attempt to assist in detailing their technical aspects. Slowly, over the course of its existence, the AHDS had a significant iterative effect on the overall quality of the technical appendices of AHRC applications, with those funded becoming increasingly detailed and much more likely to adhere to international standards. In a similar sentiment to Bethany Nowviskie's "self-satisfied tweet," which helped to spawn this #alt-ac collection, I felt privileged, in providing advice on behalf of the AHDS, to be participating in a system that was attempting to improve the quality of research undertaken in the digital humanities. I was also mindful of the responsibility this entailed. This section of my road had some very scenic views but, as it happened, eventually contained a road-closed sign part way down.

Another aspect of the the AHDS was that it acted as an archive for the significant digital outputs for the projects the AHRC funded. Although they were required to deposit their data (for later potential re-use) as a condition of their funding, many of those in receipt of funding attempted to avoid this responsibility. In 2008 the AHRC (and later JISC), for various reasons and in the face of financial cuts, ceased their funding of the AHDS as a whole. The loss of free, detailed advice on the technical aspects of digital humanities projects is still felt in UK higher education. I am regularly contacted by academics wishing to get best-effort advice concerning their projects and who, regardless of what the funding bodies appear to believe, don't have access to such specialised advice at their own institutions. Moreover, the closure of a nationally-funded archive for arts and humanities research data has had a significant impact on the long-term preservation of these materials. Although individual institutional repositories were meant to take up the slack, a majority of these are still not archiving research data in a useful or discoverable manner.

Present

With the closure of the AHDS I stopped working directly for the OTA and instead took on a more senior role in the superstructure which contains this and other similar projects in Computing Services: the Research Technologies Service (RTS). This meant I could work across a number of projects at institutional, national, and international levels, becoming more directly involved with the funding process and acting as principal investigator on research bids. Working across a larger range of projects has given me a chance not only to explore my interests in medieval textual culture but also gain an increasing interest in textual phenomena across larger segments of the historical range of mankind's production of texts — while becoming even more familiar with digital tools for their interrogation. I feel that working on many projects from different disciplines across a wide time range of historical interest gives me more far-reaching insights into the history of text.

As part of a desired centralisation of those providing data solutions and information development, we formed a new team InfoDev which undertakes data transformation, consultation, and web application development for research projects and institutions both inside and outside of the University of Oxford. This brings together a number of individuals working on disparate projects in the department and under the time I have been co-manager of this group they have increasingly started working as an interconnected team of individuals. We've provided research support and data solutions to those inside the university and also for a variety of external institutions. We've developed an agreed set of technologies and are building up a workflow for certain types of projects. All of this results in less expensive work for clients as they are charged on a notional (less than) cost-recovery basis of time spent on the work after a pro-bono period has been exhausted.

Even before working for the OTA, RTS, and InfoDev I was also involved with the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). It was central to the work of the CURSUS project that I become

familiar with their Guidelines. Although I started participating by asking lots of questions on the TEI-L mailing list, soon I was able to answer other people's questions. Every two years from 2004 onward I have been re-elected to the TEI's Technical Council, the body responsible for the technical maintenance and improvement of its Guidelines.[2] This means that I've been involved in forming, suggesting, or implementing many of the new aspects of the TEI, especially with respect to the TEI P5 release. Moreover, I've become intimately familiar with many of the more esoteric recommendations of the Guidelines and the background processes which help users constrain or extend the TEI for specific projects.[3] My contributions to the TEI Consortium have also included being its Assistant Webmaster, designing and implementing its newsfeed, and representing the TEI community at various levels. Becoming this familiar with the TEI and contributing to its infrastructure has repaid me richly. I'm regularly approached for consultation on a wide variety of interesting projects, and to run bespoke TEI workshops in many exotic foreign locations along my diverging road. How many traditional academics at this point in their careers get to help to maintain an international standard used on such a wide range of projects and in so many different fields?

While working at the OTA and attempting to encourage the spread of best practice in humanities text encoding, I was invited to join a then-fledgling project called Digital Medievalist (DM). This is an international community of practice providing an umbrella group and forum for those creating or using digital media for medieval studies. Starting as a concerned group with shared interests, it has developed into a volunteer-based community with a fully-elected board running a peer-reviewed open access journal, a well-subscribed mailing list, wiki, and newsfeed, which organises conference sessions at major medieval conferences. I've had the pleasure to be continually re-elected to the DM board and am currently its director. Over my time with DM I have been responsible for the implementation of the majority of its technical infrastructure. At the moment, this includes maintaining a Linux virtual machine that runs the website, an Apache Coocon instance transforming subversion-backed TEI P5 XML with custom XSLT for the site and its journal, and a variety of other scripts and software. DM continues to encourage knowledge exchange amongst the digital humanities and medievalist communities, especially in the areas of best practices for digital resources creation in the field of medieval studies.

Involvement with both the TEI and DM have provided real and tangible benefits to my career, but in both cases these originate from ongoing voluntary contributions to open communities. The same is true in academic as in 'alternative academic' communities, though it sounds trite: you get out of it what you put in. Large portions of the academic community work because people contribute their time and effort on matters which, strictly speaking, are not within the remit of their jobs. Academics (and 'alternative academics' alike) donate time in peer-reviewing articles or abstracts for conferences and even in writing articles for commercial publishers who then sell them back to the same academic community. 'Alternative academics' in Digital Humanities are even more likely to be involved in running websites, email lists, editing online journals, and contributing to community initiatives. In some cases these may be, like DM, communities in a social and academic sense, or they might be open source software or standards-developing communities such as the TEI.

The formal recognition of these contributions is where a difference sometimes becomes evident, between an academic and an 'alternative academic'. Academic contracts often describe a research portion for posts that assumes such participation in related communities and in the standard academia publication model. In many 'alternative academic' posts, similar participation holds less importance or is even not considered part of the job despite its great benefits. My own department is a service department, not an academic one — our academic achievements (such as publishing articles or giving conference papers) are not viewed as central to the services we provide to the University of Oxford or other institutions. Although voluntarily keep a of academic articles that we have published, the work of writing these is usually undertaken on evenings and weekends and, unlike in a traditional academic job, such work certainly does not count toward demonstration of some research or publication requirement. I believe my involvement (such as participation in communities and publications) in the Digital Humanities field to be both beneficial to the services I provide as part of my post and often consider them academic in nature. But in terms of moving me a few more miles down the road on my career path, they are an uneven surface and may indeed exist as a bit of a hill, in that they add nothing helpful to the journey (as perceived by my employers) and probably slow me down by sapping intellectual and physical energy that I could be using toward other sorts of progress.

It is not that this labour is uncompensated that bothers me, but that it is unrecognised as improving part of the services we provide. The work that many 'alternative academics' do is compensated to some degree through the rewards (mostly social) that they receive from the communities in which they participate. Many, perhaps most, traditional academics labor outside of usual working hours in providing exactly the same kinds of contributions to their own fields, but crucially this is seen as part of their jobs. It is partly in recognition of this that they often do not have set hours and on days they don't have teaching or departmental

meetings can flexibly work from home on their research. They don't have "hours," just a job to do and the metrics for that job are often in the form of teaching evaluations and publications lists of their research. While some in alternative academic careers do enjoy such flexibility, it becomes increasingly rare if the job comes to be seen as a solely service-providing one with regular hours. Since becoming 'academic-related' staff at the University of Oxford I've had to work on any personal research and articles (such as this one) in my own time, even when research or publications are a direct outgrowth of work I undertake for the University or could be clearly shown to benefit the job role I undertake.

Futures?

"But why is this a problem?", some will say. I am employed to do a certain job which, at its core, does not privilege academic contributions to the field of Digital Humanities as part of the services my department provides to the University. If I choose to be involved in this field *in my spare time* then why should I expect any recognition for the involvement? While in some ways it would be nice if the University officially recognised academic contributions by its 'alternative academic' members of staff in a similar vein as the recognition it provides for those employed specifically for the purpose, it is completely understandable that it does not — that this work is simply not our job. But should more jobs exist where this state of affairs is not the case? Is it short-sighted not to nurture effort, which — more often than not — appears to inform, educate, and improve services and those delivering them?

This is perhaps a failing of Digital Humanities in the UK: although there are a thankfully an increasing (if still small) number of digital humanities centres where Digital Humanities research is understood as research in and of itself, outside of them those involved in DH are often seen as providing services to 'real' academics — academics who are unable or unwilling to learn digital tools at the expense of engagment in their own 'real' research. Although many point to fruitful and interesting collaborations between humanities departments and digital humanities scholars, from the outside these collaborations often appear as the academic providing subject-specific knowledge and the digital humanities scholar as a mere technician realising the dream of an academic. Often, inside the collaborations, the academic is quite aware of the scholarly nature of the contributions by his Digital Humanities partner, but this is not made plain to those outside this collaboration. Obviously there are times when such a collaboration will involve non-academic technical work undertaken by the Digital Humanities scholar, but many other times this work involves creating new intellectual content or highly interpretative analysis, and breaking barriers that were entirely unknown to his academic collaborator. Is the lack of awareness in such situations the faults of collaborators, of the expectations of the institution or the field as a whole, or — as is much more likely — some combination of all of these and more? It may comfort those in Digital Humanities to consider that, as it becomes increasingly recognised as an academic field, these problems will likely lessen. One day the road will be paved and well-lit, but until then there are an infinite number of paths to follow.

My current post is rewarding and interesting and I am happy about the road I've taken. I'm not wandering aimlessly, I'm just navigating by alternate means. The problem is that there is no Google Maps or OpenStreetMap to visualize our route for those who do not see that there really is a footpath across this field and that it should be a right-of-way. There are many who simply do not understand a decision not to continually seek standard academic employment. Here I don't mean those who (mistakenly) think it is my job to help people with their printers; the worst are not those who are simply ignorant. No, the worst are those who themselves learn about and approach digital humanities from the perspective of a tenured and well-established post in their respective academic fields. These people gain many skills and insights, perhaps even coming to think of themselves as digital humanists as well. But, because they retain their academic appointments (where they come to be seen as the people in the department who do their subject + computers), they assume in a self-justifying manner that those on superficially less-rewarding 'alternative academic' career paths really must only be struggling through a muddy rut on the way back to the more traditional road that they themselves have taken. Often it is expressed in the kindest and most well-meaning terms, that this 'alternative academic' career post that you currently hold is a good and useful post-doctoral collector lane to your future, 'real academic' employment destination.

While some are happy to get back to the main road, others are abandoning the well-paved multi-lane highways of traditional academic careers and walking on less-trodden hiking paths of the 'alternative academic.' While I've stretched this analogy to more than its breaking point: I hope to have suggested that these paths — often less well-explored, and certainly muddier — sometimes, when we are lucky, lead to even more interesting views where we can see that more traditional highways merge and split from each other, while cutting their followers off from many natural wonders around them. I'm not always sure where the next stopping point is, nor am I in a hurry to get to the destination, because I'm really enjoying the views.

[11] http://www.cursus.uea.ac.uk/ is currently, and hopefully temporarily, down but see also the Wayback Machine cached copy at http://web.archive.org/web/20080620035929/www.cursus.uea.ac.uk/

[2] I was re-elected to the TEI Technical Council in 2010 for two years when I first wrote this.

[3] For example, with the workings of Roma and the TEI's ODD system.